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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated the doctrine of truth of the pragmatic philosopher C.S. Peirce. The ontological and epistemological bases of the doctrine are described, and the status of truth, reality, investigation, and belief are drawn from these bases. The results indicate that Peirce's doctrine could be productively related to rhetorical theory, especially "inventio," and in the end the rhetor would account for the truth of his or her propositions, as well as their persuasive efficacy. Consequently, communication and rhetorical theory would give equal epistemological and ethical emphasis to the search for truth, and the search for the means of communication or persuasion. (Author/TS)

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A DESCRIPTION OF WHAT CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE MEANT BY TRUTH AND AN APPLICATION OF HIS DOCTRINE OF TRUTH TO RHETORICAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated the doctrine of truth of the Pragmatic philosopher C. S. Peirce. The ontological and epistemological bases of the doctrine were described. The status of truth, reality, investigation, and belief were drawn from these bases. The result indicated that Peirce's doctrine could be productively related to rhetorical theory, especially inventio, with the result that the rhetor would account for the truth of his propositions, as well as their persuasive efficacy. Consequently, communication and rhetorical theory would give equal epistemological and ethical emphasis to (1) the search for truth, and (2) the search for the means of communication or persuasion.

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Introduction

Charles Sanders Peirce occupies the place of a giant in the march of American philosophy. Unfortunately, Peirce published during his lifetime no book on philosophy, nor was he long associated with any university from which he could spread his ideas. Despite lifelong obscurity, Peirce is now recognized as the founder of the one distinctively American philosophic movement: pragmatism.

Pragmatism, as we know it, followed the thought of William James and John Dewey, instead of Peirce. But it was Peirce who first created its principles. Indeed, students of philosophy are now returning in ever increasing numbers to the original source of pragmatic theory, there to mine a veritable treasure of ideas, more profound and thought-provoking than even those of James and Dewey. Close scrutiny of Peirce's papers is taking place because he formulated many conceptions which are only now beginning to be understood; moreover, there are implications in his thought which have not been fully developed. Especially undeveloped, but promising, are the implications of Peirce's work for rhetorical theory. This paper will take one facet of his thought and interface it with a correlative rhetorical concept. Hopefully, this will be but one of many profitable investigations of Peirce by members of the Speech profession.

The purpose of this paper is (1) to describe the doctorine of truth of Charles Sanders Peirce, and (2) to develop the implications for rhetorical theory of Peirce's doctrine of truth.

Peirce's Doctrine of Truth

According to James Feibleman, "the final goal of all inquiry is the discovery of truth, . . . and the determination of the status of truth is the guiding factor in all epistemological inquiry."[1]

Initially, I wish to state, as accurately as possible, Charles Sanders Peirce's doctrine of truth. I shall quote his definition of truth, and then his attempts to clarify this definition by distinguishing it from others. Peirce states that:

> "All propositions refer to one and the same determinately singular subject, well-understood between all interpreters and utterers; namely, to the Truth, which is the universe of all universes, and is assumed on all hands to be real." (5.506)[2]

Feibleman interprets this to mean:

> Truth, then, is the reference of all propositions to the universe, (5.153) and as such is endowed with eternal life. (1.219) . . . . Epistemologically , . . . truth may be defined as a process.[3]

Thus, the first proposition involving questions of truth to which Peirce committed himself was to the realist position; i.e., he believed in a world independent of human thought. This is the position of science. Peirce, throughout his life, regarded the

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[1] An Introduction to Peirce's Philosophy: Interpreted as a System, (New York and London, 1946), p. 211.

[2] Ibid..

[3] Ibid., p. 212

methodology of the physical sciences as "exhibiting most clearly the virtues of soundly conducted inquiry,"[4] and left little doubt about the pre-eminent place which the natural sciences occupied in his thinking.

The second central point to be made here is that for Peirce, truth and falsity must be defined in terms of belief and doubt.

> All you have any dealings with are your doubts and beliefs, with the course of life that forces new beliefs upon you and gives you power to doubt old beliefs . . . . But if by truth and falsity you mean something not definable in terms of doubt and belief in any way, then you are talking of entities of whose existence you can know nothing.[5]

In other words, that which a person does not in the least doubt, he must, and does, hold to be completely true. Thomas A. Goudge points out that objection might be taken to this view on the ground that despite the fact that there are scores of things which a person does not doubt, nevertheless, he may very well be mistaken about some of them. "To deny this would be to make truth wholly subjective, a mere matter of private satisfaction."[6] Peirce's reply is that:

> The beliefs in terms of which truth is defined are those stable beliefs reached by an indefinitely long application of scientific method.[7]

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[4] Thomas A. Goudge, The Thought of C. S. Peirce (Toronto, 1950), p. 22.

[5] Ibid., pp. 23-24.

[6] Ibid., p. 24.

[7] Ibid.

Thus, for example, we say that the proposition:

> "Caesar crossed the Rubicon" is true because the further we push our historical investigations, the more strongly a belief in that proposition is established in our minds. Conversely, to say that the proposition is false means that we must ultimately be led to disbelieve it as our inquiry is carried on indefinitely. If, inspired by the artifical procedure of Cartesianism, you keep insisting that there is something more to truth than this, you will "only puzzle yourself by talking of this 'metaphysical truth' and 'metaphysical falsity,' that you know nothing about" (5.416).[8]

Hence, Peirce describes truth thus:

> Truth is that concordance of an abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief . . . .[9]

Accordingly, a belief is satisfactory only when all possible doubt in regard to it has been removed by the scientific method. To ask for more than this would be to seek the unattainable. "The truth is that at which inquiry aims,"[10] and "the search for truth is the search for the ideally complete set of stable, satisfactory beliefs arrived at by continuous scientific inquiry."[11] For Peirce, "the opinion which is

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8 Ibid.

9 The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, ed., Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 5.565. 394. Hereafter referred to as Peirce.

10 Peirce, 5.557. 392.

11 Goudge, Thought of Peirce, p. 25.

fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by Truth."[12]

For Peirce, the quest for truth is a crusade for all mankind, as is made evident in his frequent references to the co-operative nature of inquiry:

> For "the progress of science cannot go far except by collaboration; or, to speak more accurately, no mind can take one step without the aid of other minds" (2.220) . . . . Thus, the physical sciences constitute a vast, co-operative enterprise in which an issue is not regarded as settled until all intelligent and informed doubt about it has ceased, and all competent persons have come to a catholic agreement. This is the main reason why they make such steady progress. Their proponents envisage the quest for truth as essentially the task of the scientific community--"not as the work of one man's life, but as that of generation after generation, indefinitely." (5.589).[13]

Peirce, however, does not restrict the use of the methods of science, with its quest for proved and established laws, to the realm of the natural sciences. His attempt was to design some method of getting agreement between the beliefs of philosophers, and he saw clearly that the method of science was substantially different from any system of promoting individual beliefs through reiteration. Peirce, then, was of the opinion that all inquiry requires a co-operative community of minds, and he stressed the fact that the notion of such a community must become involved in philosophic inquiry if that inquiry was to emerge from its present

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[12] Peirce, 5. 566. 395.

[13] Goudge, Life of Peirce, p. 25.

condition—"for as long as earnest and industrious students of it are able to come to agreement upon scarce a single principle, I do not see how it can be considered as otherwise than in its infancy."[14] In a letter to William James, Peirce repeats these sentiments, adding that he has a deep conviction "that philosophy is either a science or is balderdash."[15]

Peirce, then, believes in a world independent of human thought, and believes, further, that the discovery of this world is the responsibility of all who inquire:

> The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth and the object represented in this opinion is the real.[16]

Buchler believes that this statement by Peirce should be translated to read:

> All who investigate (by the scientific method) will attain a belief (i.e. be led to agree upon an opinion) which is what we call the truth.[17]

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[14] Peirce, 1. 620. 342.

[15] Goudge, Thought of Peirce, p. 26

[16] Peirce, 5. 407. 268.

[17] Justus Buchler, Charles Peirce's Empiricism (New York and London, 1939), p. 73.

There is implied here, as Buchler points out, a distinction between 'perfect' and 'approximate' truth. Is there, then, in Peirce's doctrine two distinct and irreconcilable views of truth?:

1. Truth consists in the opinion which science at a certain stage arrives at.

2. Truth consists in an ideal opinion which science indefinitely approaches.

Buchler makes two points in answer:

> (i) The statement of 5.407 . . . does not, in itself, intend a distinction between 'perfect' and 'approximate' truth, and to assert that the latter approaches the former. It asserts merely: All who adopt the scientific method are sure to agree on an opinion which, since science is the best method of establishing opinion, is to be called the truth. The emphasis here is on the compulsive power of science, on the fact that scientific investigation (which for Peirce is synonymous merely with 'investigation') promotes unanimity. (ii) Nevertheless Peirce does intend to distinguish between approximate and perfect truth, and elsewhere, for instance, he defines truth as "that to a belief in which belief would tend indefinitely towards absolute fixity" (5.416).[18]

Buchler believes that the distinction which Peirce tried to clarify is not a hard and fast distinction between two totally different concepts of truth, but rather a distinction of two complementary elements in a general conception of truth. Buchler says:

> The notion of truth depends both upon the actual practice of science and on a goal which it seeks to attain. The notion of a perfectly true opinion has no meaning apart from the notion of opinions which correct themselves; and versely, we cannot speak of opinions as

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[18]Buchler, Peirce's Empiricism, p. 145-146.

> approximately true unless we conceive of some limit to which they approximate . . . . It is the approximately true which represents what is ordinarily understood by 'true' . . . . The 'true' is the 'confirmed.' The perfectly true would be that which theoretically required no alteration, or that which, no matter how far investigation were carried, would be uninfluenced in its status. It is no more than a limit or standard for increase of perfection . . . . Peirce teaches that truth in general is relative to investigation; that the purpose of investigation is to destroy doubt and establish belief; and that science, being the best method of achieving this purpose, is the instrument of truth.[19]

It has been shown that truth for Peirce is the opinion on which the community agrees, not arbitrarily, but as "the irresistible effect of inquiry."[20] But, as Buchler warns, misunderstanding must be guarded against. Peirce does not mean to imply that upon any given problem or subject under investigation the community of researchers will in fact always arrive at the truth.

> Certain questions have been settled, at least for the time being, and science therefore possesses a body of 'established truths'; but there is no guarantee that a given question will actually be settled. Peirce's point is that it is unwarranted "to suppose that, with regard to any given question (which has any clear meaning), investigation would not bring forth a solution of it, if it were carried far enough" (5.409).[21]

In other words, if a question is a meaningful question, then it is an answerable question. It is decidable. If a question is a meaningful question, the truth or falsity of the answers to it will be capable of positive

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[19] Ibid., p. 146.

[20] Peirce, 5. 494. 343.

[21] Buchler, Peirce's Empiricism, p. 148

and productive investigation. "but to say that a question is answerable, and that it will in fact be answered are clearly different."[22] Any assertion that a given question's truth will in fact be eventually decided, can be no more than a 'hope', based on the history of science.[23]

"Simple" truth, then, is to Peirce "the conformity of things to their essential principle,"[24] Truth is definitely something objective; "there is something that is so, no matter if there be an overwhelming vote against it."[25] "There is such a thing as a proposition correct whatever may be opinions about it."[26] Furthermore:

> The very opinion entertained by those who deny that there is any Truth, in the sense defined, is that it is not force, but their inward freedom which determines their experiential cognition. But this opinion is flatly contradicted by their own experience. They insist upon shutting their eyes to the element of complusion, although it is directly experienced by them."[27]

Thus it is "that truth and justice are great powers in the world is no figure of speech, but a plain fact to which theories must accommodate themselves."[28]

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., p. 149

[24] Peirce, 5. 572. 398.

[25] Ibid., 2. 135. 71.

[26] Ibid., 2. 137. 73.

[27] Feibleman, Peirce's Philosophy, p. 212.

[28] Peirce, 1. 348. 178.

This brings to a close this brief survey of the most general features of the doctrine of truth according to Peirce. His view of truth is best understood when it is considered within the framework of his overall system of inquiry, wherein inquiry itself is considered to be "an elaborate struggle to escape from the condition of blocked activity which we call 'doubt,' and to reach the state of smooth-running, habitual behavior which we call 'belief.'"[29] Inquiry begins with, and proceeds in terms of, beliefs which are not doubted by the investigator. By making use of observed facts, hypotheses, induction, and deduction, the researcher "arrives at conclusions that are reliable, but not infallible."[30] Truth to Peirce is the ideally complete set of such conclusions which "inquiry of definite duration would lead the scientific community to accept."[31] Reality is that to which this set of conclusions would refer. At any given point in time, the results of inquiry, the quest for truth, falls somewhat short of "complete truth." Yet, inquiry, as it is carried out by use of the methods of science, has the capacity to purge itself of errors. Inquiry, therefore, "gradually but inevitably approximates to the ideal of absolute truth." At no point, however, "does any trans-experiential reference enter. Inquiry functions exclusively within the confines of the human and the natural."[32]

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[29] Goudge, Thought of Peirce, p. 50.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

The Place of Peirce's Doctrine of Truth in Rhetorical Theory

The canons of rhetoric as set forth in the ad Herennium represent the broad divisions of the whole subject of rhetoric. According to the classical tradition, all rhetoric is divided into five parts: invention, disposition, elocution, memory, and delivery. This fivefold division, with varying emphasis, has remained fairly standard even until today, except for memory.

According to present day American rhetorical theory, each of these parts has a distinctive function. It is with the function of the inventive aspect of rhetoric that this section of the present paper is concerned.

Thonssen and Baird, authors of the most widely accepted book on speech criticism in the United States, describe the function of invention to be as follows:

> Invention involves the attempt on the part of the orator, as Cicero says, "to find out what he should say . . . ." It is an investigative undertaking, embracing a survey and forecast of the subject and a search for the arguments suitable to the given rhetorical effort . . . .
>
> Without proposing to categorize the constituents of rhetorical theory, we may say in general that the concept of invention includes the entire investigative undertaking, the idea of the status, and the modes of persuasion--logical, emotional, and ethical--in all of their complex interrelations.[33]

This focus upon the inventive aspect of rhetoric being a search for suitable arguments is followed in most present-day speech textbooks. Ten basic speech texts taken from my shelf at random, for

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[33] Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird. Speech Criticism (New York, 1948), p. 79.

example, treat invention in the manner described by Thonssen and Baird, and, hence, devote an average of only twenty pages out of an average book length of 550 pages to a description of recommended methods of inquiry.

It is as a direct result of the type of treatment of invention which is exemplified by these texts that I believe Peirce's doctrine of truth should be applied to rhetorical theory. Persuasion is such an inseparable part of the world of action that the way in which people persuade--not only how they say it, but also what they say--is undoubtedly an important part of the struggle of the human race to make progress.

Yet, the perspective which is necessary to make rhetoric function as a constructive influence in our time is lacking in the teachings of most of the textbooks and writing of the field of speech. The emphasis in speech is currently placed upon discovering what will work in the speaking situation, not upon discovering what is valid. The emphasis in the field of speech is upon effective communication, not upon responsible communication, and too often the results of such communication are not in the best interests of the ultimate survival of the race (in this thermo-nuclear age, at least).

Thus it is I believe that the doctrine of truth developed by Charles Sanders Peirce should be introduced into the inventive aspect of rhetoric to serve as a model or paradigm pre-eminently worthy of imitation. For what does the scientist do when he acts as a scientist? First, he knows that most of the time he is making inferences, not factual statements, and, with this understanding of his own limitations, proceeds to test them.

Yet in much of rhetoric, the inventive aspect does not explicitly recognize the necessity for testing inferences. Secondly, the scientist purposely tries to prove himself wrong by devising procedures which if successful would explode his hypothesis. How many persuaders try to do this? Peirce's doctrine of truth may suggest an archetype to be followed by the "craftsman" in fashioning his invention. In this light, the inventive aspect would have <u>two</u> parts:

1. the search for truth.
2. the search for arguments.[35]

I do not intend to suggest for rhetoric a perfection exceeding what is possible in reality, a search for some unattainable truth. It must be remembered that Peirce never implied that upon any given problem under investigation, the investigators would in fact always arrive at the truth. His position was that if a question is a meaningful question, then it is amenable to positive and productive investigation. Viewed within this frame-of-reference, the theory of rhetoric should encourage thoughtful deliberation by the persuader-to-be; thoughtful deliberation of both his methodology of discovering the truth and his methodology of discovering efficacious arguments. Therefore, the persuader, as he performs the inventive task, should be concerned, first of all, with the fruits of his most rigorous investigation and profoundest thought. He must cultivate not only his skill in argument,

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[35] The resemblance here to Plato's arguments which would please the gods is recognized, but the truth of the pragmatist Peirce is distinctly different from the truth of Plato. When twentieth-century methodology is considered, the admonition of Plato to seek the truth is not an impossible demand--so long as one has in mind the truth of the pragmatist.

but also, to the limit of his ability, his capacity for careful investigation. Then, having assured himself as well as he can of the soundness of his position, he, in an effort to test his conclusions, should subject his findings to the criticism of other experts in the field.[36]

Finally, having formulated the opinion on which the community of qualified investigators agrees, as the "irrestible effect of inquiry," then the individual may begin the search for the means of persuasion. But, even then, he must keep his mind open to new data, changes which occur in time, etc., never assuming that he has reached perfect truth.

In this fashion, then, I apply Peirce's doctrine of truth to the inventive aspect of rhetoric, in the belief that by giving equal emphasis in our theory to (1) the search for truth, and, (2) the search for arguments, we might heed Peirce's admonishment: "That truth and justice are great powers in the world is no figure of speech, but a plain fact to which theories must accommodate themselves," and so make rhetoric a more constructive influence in our time.

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[36] These two steps would apparently correspond to Professor Perelman's description of reason in action: (1) the subject himself in deliberation embodying reason. They would also correspond to a synthesis of the views of William James and Peirce. James would stress the particular: "The effective meaning of any philosophic proposition can always be brought down to some particular proposition, in our future practical experience, whether active or passive; the point lying rather in the fact that the experience must be particular, than in the fact that it must be active." Twice James uses the word 'particular'. James makes pragmatism of direct and personal concern to the particular person. Peirce, on the other hand, always stressed the general. Peirce wrote James a letter asking: "What is utility, if it is confined to a single person? Truth is public. 'For Peirce, 'the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by truth.'" H. B. Van Wesep, Seven Sages: The Story of American Philosophy (New York, 1960), p. 360.

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